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ABSTRACT

An analytical framework based on Joel Kovel's five meditations on spirit (spirit power, spirit being, spirit meaning, spirit and desire, and divine spirit) was used to explore the spirituality of committed environmental activists. A purposeful and snowball sampling method was used to interview 18 individuals with a strong commitment to environmental social action. Of the 18 individuals (8 women and 10 men aged 28 to 87 years), 8 were environmental volunteers and 10 were employed in the environmental field. The participants described their spiritual paradigms as follows: monotheist, 4; atheist, 2; pantheist, 10; agnostic, 4; and "would-hot-divulge," 1. All the participants were deeply committed to and engaged in environmental activism. Although a few of them believed in a traditional God, none were fundamentalists and none saw their particular belief system as superior or the only true one. Many of them believed that they have received communication or guidance from divine spirit. They all believed that learning plays an important role in their lives and that their environmental work is the making of spirit. This was particularly true for the 16 participants who saw vit[illegible] power manifested in nature and nonhuman beings. (10 references) (MN)

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We Make Spirit by Walking: An Application of Kovel's Spirituality to the Life and Work of Committed Environmentalists

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I am sure that we make the road by walking. – Paulo Freire

And for spirituality, there is no map to the destination,
nor knowledge of how long the road may be....
Spirit has to be made; and the making is spirituality. – Joel Kovel

Abstract: This paper employs Kovel's (1991) five meditations on spirit as an analytical framework for exploring the spirituality of committed environmental activists. These meditations explicitly present spirituality as the making of spirit, that is, as bringing spirit power into one's life through learning and doing.

Introduction

Spirituality is one of the most perennial of human activities. It is related to adult learning by its implicit quality of questing for meaning. Adult educators are particularly interested in the political and social dimensions of spirituality (English & Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 2001), yet Dirkx (1997) also recognized the inner work that is a necessary component of spirituality. In spite of the recent attention given to spirituality in adult education, few empirical works exist (English & Gillen, 2000; Glazer, 1999; Tisdell, 2001). The specific purpose of this paper is to present findings from an empirical investigation of the spiritual life world of committed environmentalists, and to relate those findings to the definition of spirituality outlined by Kovel (1991) in *History and Spirit*. The overarching purpose is to advance adult education's understanding of spirituality by investigating how the familiar and accepted notion of making "the road by walking" (Horton & Freire, 1990) can be applied to spirit as well.

Theoretical Framework

Environmentalism may claim one of the most celebrated of spiritual legacies. One need not look long in the pages of nature writing to find references to spirituality (Berry, 1988). In spite of the strong association between nature and spirituality, no one has offered to describe how spirituality is actually expressed in the life and work of the committed environmentalist. This is an important omission. Within the past 20 years, as environmental problems have grown from speculation to reality, the spiritual roots of the environmental crisis are becoming more apparent (Kovel, 1991; Rockefeller & Elder, 1992). From this perspective, a misguided spirituality or a spiritless materialism is contributing to planetary destruction. Thus, spirit questing or its lack has a direct impact on our human relationship with the environment and its ability to support life into

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the future. If the roots of environmental destruction are in part spiritual, a clue to environmental healing will be found in the spirituality of those committed to environmental protection.

An ecological theoretical framework was employed in this study. As the "underlying structure, orientation, and viewpoint" (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p. 23-24) of the study, ecology provides a framework for investigating how spirituality relates to the learning process of individuals as they become committed to environmental action. Broadly speaking, ecology is the study of relationships, with a particular focus on the relationship between the whole and the parts of a system. Using ecology as a theoretical framework for studying spirituality is appropriate because ecology's main tenant is that complex systems are composed of interrelated and interdependent components that cannot be properly revealed using a reductionist methodology. In other words, complex systems are multi- and inter-dimensional, and cannot be understood by examining the parts in isolation. Spirituality, also, is multi- and inter-dimensional, part of a complex interdependent system, in two ways. First, it cannot be separated from the context of the individual and society, and therefore must be seen as part of both the psychological and social world of the individual. Second, spirituality is action in service to the idea of relationship and connectivity. In my use of ecology as a theoretical framework, I am calling upon the first assumption — that the spirituality of an individual is part of a complex interdependent system that cannot be properly studied out of its psychological and social context.

Research Design and Methods

Using purposeful and snowball sampling, I interviewed 18 individuals who are committed to environmental social action. Eight are environmental volunteers, and the others are employed in the environmental field. None had plans to cease their environmental work. My questions to the participants were mostly unstructured and open, allowing them to define spirituality in their own terms and according to their own understanding. My choice of Kovel's spirituality, which followed data collection, comes from my judgment that his is the most practically useful and in-depth of explanations, and that his meditations bear an unmistakable resemblance to the work of adult educators such as Horton and Freire. Indeed, Kovel's work is grounded in Freire's conscientization: "Between the consumerist hedonism of late capitalism, and the repressiveness of traditional religion, lies another path, grounded in an acceptance of responsibility and one's situation in history. Moving away from Egoism, this path recognizes the frailness of the self in a violent world defined by domination. It is less concerned with guilt than with conscientiously addressing reality, and chooses responsibility over an illusory purification" (Kovel, 1991, pp. 136-137). While Kovel explicitly did not reject the religious path, he clearly indicated that spirituality has more to do with social action against domination than with religious piety.

My analytical approach was iterative and dialectical, involving repeated reading and coding of interview transcripts, then juxtaposing Kovel's definitions of spirit with these emerging meanings. The dialectic of placing Kovel's conceptions of spirit against the words of the participants helped to give structure to the often illusive nature of spirit talk. Spirit is an important starting point for this examination, for spirituality is "the practice of spirit—the conscious, goal-directed activity which brings spirit and soul into being" (Kovel, 1991, p. 198). Kovel's notion of spirituality is readily assimilated into models of adult education, for it focuses on what people actually do and learn day to day to become more fully actualized by bringing spirit into their lives.

Kovel's Spirituality

Kovel's project was built on five interconnected essays which follow dictionary definitions of spirit. Although each essay may stand alone, they are best understood as an interconnected web of meaning which are at times seemingly inseparable. I will outline these briefly below and allow the participants' words to provide more in-depth exploration.

1. Spirit power. In this first sense, spirit is the "direct apprehension of a vital and material force pervading the entire universe" (Kovel, 1991, p. 22). As vital force, spirit is experienced in one of two primary ways: as the holy or as inspiration. Both of these experiences of spirit are understood as being given by a powerful universal force.
2. Spirit Being. In this sense, spirit power is experienced as a form or a being. Familiar examples include the experience of a beautiful landscape, in communication from or about deceased loved ones, or in the apprehension of ghosts. One may feel spirit residing in a new born baby, or manifested in the simple act of another human. When spirit power takes form, one experiences spirit being.
3. Spirit Meaning. Spirit meaning is the elusive but authentic meaning of something. Spirit meaning is revealed when truth and value merge. At this juncture, spirit becomes engaged with action. People make choices based on the revelation of spirit meaning. That is, they are able to reach beyond the self, and their actions become rooted in a larger truth or life meaning.
4. Spirit and Desire: Kovel talked at length about the many faces of spirit and desire. At its core, desire can be life-affirming or life-destroying. Desire is the yearning for connection, yet it may be manifested as domination and violence as well as liberation and nonviolence. As its spiritual manifestation, desire is non-violent, but also characterized by personal suffering. When spirit desire directs a life path, it is often expressed in non-violent social action, and the full meaning of conscientization is expressed.
5. Divine Spirit: This is the naming and description of divine spirit. Kovel pointed out that God, or whatever we choose to call vital power, is ultimately indescribable. However, Kovel noted that there are many paths and traditions which point the way to divine spirit, including religious traditions from both East and West, as well as indigenous and new spiritualities.

Spirituality – The Making of Spirit

Despite these five interconnected notions of spirit, spirituality still has to be made. These five notions exist not independently of the self, but are made and experienced by individuals and communities through their everyday activities. Their making and experiencing is spirituality — the actions and experiences that bring spirit into being. By describing spirituality as the way in which people bring spirit into their lives, Kovel suggested that at least some of these five notions of spirit will be made and experienced through spiritual journey.

Findings

The participants ranged in age from 28 to 87, and included eight women and ten men. Although their environmental work was not necessarily identified as education, teaching others about the environment was a major concern of all but two, and those two were involved with the politics of environmental policy. To provide a reference point, the participants' expression of divine spirit will be presented first. Using Russell's (2000) spiritual paradigms as a guide, the

participants' were classified as follows:

Spiritual Paradigm	# of Participants	Description of Paradigm
Monotheist	4	A single vital force, usually identified as God; one supreme being
Atheist	2	No supreme being
Pantheist	10	Everything is an expression of the vital force
Agnostic*	4	Not certain
Would not divulge*	1	

*Not included in Russell (2000).

Pantheists reject the notion of a separate, single all powerful deity, and believe that vital power resides in all things (Russell, 2000). Of the 18 participants, 10 expressed pantheist sentiments. Steve, a 50 year-old nature center director said that he does not have a religion but a spirituality: "I did read the Bible some looking for some help and guidance, but I never went to church. I went to a forest." Mark, a 55 year-old university professor, said that the "big picture is really what moves me, and is sort of an awe and wonder, sort of the mystery of it all. Maybe there is this big, overriding guide, if you will." Earl, a 55 year old non-profit environmental administrator and atheist claimed that, although he is not uncomfortable with the term God, "there is no spiritual world out there. There is no mind and matter, it's just stuff. There is not a realm of the physical and a realm of the spiritual." While four of the participants were classified as monotheists, they are not traditional in their beliefs. Ed, a 64-year old retired businessman, is active in his Christian church. He talks to God all of the time, and God talks to him. Yet, Ed is not really sure what God is: "There is just something there." Becky, another monotheist, "absolutely" believes "in a higher power," yet she does not know if she believes in heaven. She believes that if you live your life being kind to humans and to other living creatures, you will be treated fairly "in the final analysis."

How did these environmentalists apprehend the vital force? Mike, a 66-year old environmental consultant, has come close to sensing "the mover," but called this sensation his own "vibrant present response" to the natural world. He believes that there must have been such a mover, but that details are unknown and unknowable. Quen, a 57-year old retired corporate manager, feels energized and rejuvenated when he is in nature. He said that the more you learn about nature, "the more miraculous it becomes." You have to believe "that it was created by something far more intelligent than we are. But I don't know whether it's a separate thing." Terry, a 57-year old environmental consultant, finds his spirituality in his "sense of the land, the wholeness, and by virtue of my forestry background I see how things work...It's like an Indian or Native American sense of spirituality and God and the land." All but the atheists have sensed spirit power through their experiences in the natural world.

Closely related to the notion of spirit power, the participants also found that this power can reside in form or being. Often, spiritual power was expressed as being generally manifest in the natural world. Joyce, a 49-year old environmental singer-songwriter, finds God in "steelhead salmon and salt marshes." An attendee of local Friends meetings, she ascribes to the Quaker belief that everyone, including non-humans and inanimate nature, has "that of God" in them:

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"We all carry that of God within us. It's not up there or out there and I think respecting that calls me to higher service." Three participants finds spirit validation in the beauty of nature. Ed was converted to environmentalism after seeing a pink lady-slipper whose beauty "made my heart stop." Now, he sees God's beauty in all of nature. Marty, a 47-year old non-profit executive director, finds beauty in nature as an expression of God's handiwork: "I give God credit for making the cardinal. This is my version of spiritual. It's not my creation. It's God's creation." Dahlina, a 60-year old nun and director of a environmental academic program, said that nature is the revelation of God. The only way to know God, she feels, is through our experience in nature and in the world. All of the participants, with the exception of the atheists, perceived that vital power resides in nature as well as in humans. In some cases, moreover, life events were seen as synchronous, occurring according to some unknowable design crafted by a more powerful, universal, and more intelligent force.

Although these participants may embrace other spiritual meanings in their lives, in the context of our interview the meanings most often expressed were in relation to the environment. Every participant expressed the knowledge of life's interconnectedness as being an important and life-directing concept. Joyce said: "I have a very strong spiritual center that tells me that it's all connected." Wendy, a 51-year old director of environmental education, put the environment in a learning context: "Maybe that again is another definition of spirituality. It's about going outside exploring together and learning together. It's the valuing of who we all are and saying that we each have a valuable piece to contribute."Another theme in the area of spirit meaning is the notion that humans should not dominate nature, but should protect and conserve the natural world. Earl, one of the two atheists, put this idea into strictly rational terms: "We should be intelligent tinkerers, and not throw away the parts." Mike phrased this idea in terms of self restraint, saying that "we don't have a right to take that much and dominate that much." Ellen, an 82-year old Franciscan nun, came late in life to her environmentalism. Now, she works to "get other people to realize how we need to change our whole outlook from being human centered to creation centered."

Desire, like meaning, was expressed in terms of the natural environment. Dahlina, for example, works at the scale of administering a college curriculum, hoping that she is facilitating others to "go out and work for the environment." In this group of individuals, 12 explicitly are involved in teaching others about the environment. Joyce writes and sings environmental children's songs, and Mitt builds trails to enable people to get out and see the beauty of nature. If people see how beautiful nature is, Mitt reasons, they will protect it. Ed, who has developed an environmental curriculum for his church, feels that people will be moved to take action when they understand the crisis. Six of the participants are involved in environmental policy or administration. These participants work in the political arena to achieve their environmental goals. "I work for the things of the world that cannot work for themselves. I speak for the voiceless, the rivers and trees and the air," proclaimed Marty.

Summary

These participants are all deeply committed to and engaged in environmental activism. Although a few believe in a more traditional concept of God, none are fundamentalist. Even those who work within traditional religious settings are open and tolerant in their beliefs. None see their particular belief system as superior or as the only true one. Over half of the participants are pantheists, embracing a much wider domain of divine spirit that includes the natural environment. Many of the participants believe that they have received communication or

guidance from divine spirit, most in the form of synchronicity, but also from animal signs, direct communication from God, or in receiving and channeling universal energy. Learning plays an important role in the lives of these environmentalists. Their environmental work is the making of spirit, particularly for the 16 participants who see vital power manifested in nature and non-human beings.

Implications

Although this research has provided a framework for the empirical exploration of spirituality, it also raises a number of questions. Are atheists devoid of spirituality? Do people make spirit for a number of individual and social priorities and if so, how do they integrate those spiritual paths? Are spiritual paths fundamentally different for those diverse individual and social priorities? For example, how do non-environmentalists, abortion-rights activists, or individuals with different cultural histories, make spirit?

Spirituality has been a topic of perennial interest in adult education, and the past few years have witnessed an even greater increase in attention. In spite of this growing attention, there are few studies available that can provide a roadmap for a better understanding of what spirituality is and how it can be more clearly identified and understood in the lives of adults. As an application of Kovel's exploration of spirit and spirituality, especially as his work is based partially on the work of Freire, this research can advance our understanding of how spirit is made by social activists. This paper explores, using an empirical approach, how spirituality is the making of spirit, and the ways that spirit may be manifested in the lives of adults. A better understanding of spirit and spirituality will lead to a more holistic understanding of adult learning and action, for as Glazer (1999) reminds us, "the heart of learning is revealed *within* each one of us; rooted in the spirit" (p. 1, emphasis in original). When we neglect this, Glazer points out, "the doorway to awareness, self-knowledge, and wholeness is lost" (1999, p. 2).

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